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ABSTRACT

A cooperative planning effort by six public service agencies in California's Imperial County, an agricultural region suffering from the nation's highest unemployment rate and lowest per capita income, was designed to link and integrate the agencies' employment and training programs. It was found that the proper perspective for planning is as important as the actual plan. The planning process revealed five basic questions that must be addressed by agencies intending to cooperate: (1) How can the roles and styles of the agencies and individuals involved be coordinated effectively? (2) Which agencies and individuals should be designated as leaders and how much authority should they have? (3) How can adequate information for planning be obtained? (4) How can cooperative planning be made nonthreatening to the agencies involved? (5) How can cooperative planning be instituted without increasing costs? (PGD)

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Indicators of
Cooperative Planning

Imperial County, California

By
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April 1981

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Background

In the Fall of 1979, an Imperial County Coordinated Planning Project began 1) to develop an annual coordinating planning process for all agencies and 2) to develop an effective means for collecting planning information so that duplication and unnecessary overhead could be minimized. The focal point of the project was employment and employment training programs. The primary administrators from six public service agencies served on the steering committee to develop a policy for project activity and staff.

Imperial County, California, a rural agricultural community on the southeastern border of the state, had great interest in a project to assist employment and employment training programs. Although the 1000 square mile area of the county stretching from Mexico to Salton Sea, is among the most productive agricultural land in the world, many social and economic problems exist. The ninety-eight thousand county residents have the highest unemployment rate, the lowest per capita income and the highest AFDC rate for any county or district in the United States. Unemployment is a particularly complex problem due to the dominance of the agricultural industry, the limited natural resources for growth of other industries and the proximity to the cheap Mexican labor force. The city of Mexicali, the border crossing port of entry, has five times the population of Imperial County.

Introduction

Establishing a rationale for coordinating planning strategies which link and integrate public service agencies at the local level has been a popular concept for many years. Efforts to effect this coordination with employment and training programs were the primary aim of the legislation which initiated Prime Sponsor CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) Manpower Regulations. In the productive times of the late 1960's and 1970's, there were too many agency services which appeared to be duplicated by other public agency services at the local level to be justified. Some recent conservative political events seem to have changed the premise for coordination and planning projects. This has occurred at all three levels of government. On the federal level, there are the President Reagan budget cuts, at the state level we have the effects of Proposition #13 and the State Public Service agency operational cuts. While on the local scene there is the no-growth policy of the Board of Supervisors and its commitment to maintain agriculture as the county's primary industry. The original purposes and motivations of local cooperative projects are now being subverted. Expectations for project outcomes (regardless of stated goals and objectives) have naturally changed. These projects are expected to shoulder the responsibility for solving the critical dilemmas that have befallen public service agencies nationwide. The projects are being asked to synthesize current trends and further to develop new strategies that will salvage as much of each former system as possible. In the same breath, the projects are being asked to create new structures that have high integration potential for the advent of proposed non-categorical block grants. What we are seeing nationwide because of the political and economic situation is a growing demand for the services of private and public institutions. There are more decisions to make today, and priorities need to be established with less money. Comprehensive planning to coordinate services is valuable, because it provides a vehicle for making these difficult decisions.

In Imperial County, establishing the rationale for planning projects and viewing the process in the proper perspective has been as important as the actual planning. The primary purpose for the Imperial County Coordinated Planning Project has been to obtain and provide information to the policymakers, responsible for seeing that institutions adapt to their respective changing environment. There is an increased pressure, at present, for the three demonstration projects to become exemplary projects that other communities in the State of California

and elsewhere, can look to for a solution for emerging program problems.

Historically, planning in most institutions has been characterized as ad hoc, informal, authoritative and short ranged. All planning was oriented toward expansion. Institutional planning, in the last fifteen years, has evolved as an essential administrative process that was characteristically a comprehensive, dynamic, systematic, long-range plan, continuous for each institution. These plans, though overtly cooperative and comprehensive, were not implemented. Motivations to coordinate as a result of budget cuts have changed that. In a recent presentation in January 1981, to management staff by one of the primary administrators of a state agency, the following statement was made:

How can we cooperate more with other agencies? Ask them to talk to your staff. They have not been too willing to cooperate in the past, but then neither were we. When we had a lot of money, we did not tend to cooperate as we should have. And now that we have money problems, we are more interested. The climate is good for cooperation now, we all need to work more closely together.

If planning is a method of learning how institutions operate, then the importance of involving people to share information and participate in this process cannot be overlooked, especially in the times when a more information-based, less intuitive, decision-making approach is being utilized. Each institution's needs must be stated clearly and defined accurately so that proposed plans will satisfy stated needs. When the integrated plans are developed, they must also be communicated as clearly as possible, stating 1) directions to follow and why; 2) how progress will be measured; 3) what resources will be required to reach the goals.

Indicators for Cooperative Planning

At first glance, it would appear that identifying indicators for cooperative planning would be difficult. However, after some thought on the subject we find that the reverse may be more true. There are so many variables related to multiple agency planning, that seem to have effect. How can discussion of this topic be limited to a few pages? For brevity, five indicators will be briefly presented. These five are major indicators that have made an impact on the Imperial County project. Other indicators have made an impact or can make an impact too, but it is believed that these five have been the most important.

When the project began, the CCPP steering committee was composed of the primary administrators from six public service agencies (EDD, CETA, DR, Imperial County Office of Education, Imperial Valley College and Welfare) who hired three project staff (a coordinator, a research technician and a clerk-typist) to articulate the project. The CCPP steering committee had already decided on two goals. There was no plan for achieving these goals. To make matters worse, project staff did not understand the goals. Staff was not certain what an annual planning process for all agencies was, nor were they certain about how the collecting of planning information would minimize duplication or overhead. Nevertheless, the project began.

Initially, project staff made the following basic assumptions:

- 1) The CCPP project was to act as a change agent, which is to say, a) the project needed to define the level of dissatisfaction with existing conditions, b) the project needed to formulate a plan for something better, c) the project needed to assess the commitment of the participants towards achieving what they have set out to accomplish.
- 2) Project ideas would be shaped by social conditions--that is, the outcome of the project would be directly related to the conditions of reinforcement afforded project staff and project participants.
- 3) Group decisions would be better for cooperative planning and goals than would decisions made by an individual.
- 4) Persons chose to participate in the project because they wanted to attempt cooperative planning strategies. This implies that volunteers would have a higher level of interest and a greater commitment towards realizing project aims than persons coerced into participation.
- 5) Communications between participants would be open and honest as there would be no hidden agenda.

- 6) Key persons making decisions in each agency would be a member of the steering committee.
- 7) All activities of the project would be recorded.

I. How can you put it all together to please me now?

At the outset of the project, staff wrestled with the idea that project goal statements should be transferred into objectives (this was the request of the State CETA Office). The question was where to begin...

There were six public service agencies in the project at the local level. What were their respective histories for coordinating with other agencies? What were the explicit and implicit goals and objectives of each agency? What position did the steering committee participants have in their respective agencies? Were all project participants equal in their respective agencies? Were the participant agency decision makers? Did project participants understand and agree with with the original goal statements? What role would each agency assume toward realizing planned coordinated group goals? Was each agency controlled at the local level? Did persons in other cities (San Diego, Los Angeles, Riverside, Sacramento) control participating agencies at the local level? What was the agency regional supervisor's position on the CCPP? What was the administrative style of each agency? Were those styles compatible with cooperative strategies arrived at through a democratic process? What were the terms of the original RFP? Was the project expected to attain all the terms of the RFP because they were funded? What directions were the local cooperative planning groups expected to assume from the policy, monitoring and funding agents? How much influence would each exert over local project goals and operations? In essence, what are the terms of the contract?

These and many other questions regarding expectations need to be defined first. These questions have been raised because each has influenced the project in Imperial County. To a degree, some of these queries have not been defined after two years of project operation. It is probably fair to assume that many of the difficulties and misunderstandings that have resulted with the Imperial County project have been related to these issues.

II. Why should you listen to them?

Who controls the course of events is one of the first issues to be negotiated in any group endeavor. Group goals and democracy are ideal desired tenets, but both are usually considered impractical for product oriented tasks.

And so, even though the CCPP participants had agreed to enter the project on equal ground the first issue to be resolved was "Who is to be the leader or which agency is to exert the most influence over the events of the project?" Which agency is to control the finances? Where will the project staff be housed? Who will supervise project staff? Who will be in the committee chair? Which agency district administrator will influence the project most? How will the State CETA Office exert control over the project as a function of monitoring the project? What influence will the steering committee at the state level have on the project at the local level? Will they be an advisory or policy-making board? To what degree will the local project steering committee be policy-making or advisory?

When sub-contracts are engaged by the project, who will enter into the agreement? Who will administrate or monitor the contract? How will the terms of the agreement be defined prior to delivery of service? How will all terms of the contract be met prior to reimbursement?

After the project has begun, and terms of the contract have been defined and agreed with via goal and objective statements, how shall those terms be changed to meet changing needs? Will the State Project Advisory Committee (PAC) or State CETA Office (CETA-O) have the authority to demand alternation of goal and objectives at the local level? Shall they have the authority to impose their wishes for desired project outcome by threat of withholding funding, if certain conditions are not met? How much should the original goals and objectives be altered by any interest group over time?

III. Don't we need more information before we can plan?

Because Imperial County is a rural community of less than 100,000 population, information regarding industry, the economy, and employment training programs was scant or non-existent. Much of this economic, industry, and employment information had to be obtained via primary research. Utilizing existing resources, project staff devised ways to obtain it. The difficulty associated with rational decision making strategies, however, is the claim by some, that there is not enough information available to make a decision. Some would charge that the information obtained was too narrow, others would assert that the information was poorly integrated with existing resources and still others would insist that what they obtained was not what they hoped to receive. Attempting to obtain information for data based decisions can be a vehicle for procrastination. The information to make a decision might never be adequate. It is important when

a planning project reviews this problem that clarification be obtained. What information exists at present? What does this information mean? How can this information be interpreted? How can existing information and resources be combined to facilitate the synthesis of new interpretations?

What new information should be retrieved? What methodologies should be utilized to retrieve these data? How many steps are within information gathering stage? How long will it take to gather information? How long will it be before interpretative information can be developed for identified project goals? Is the research project formative or summative?

How can information that has been retrieved be utilized to assist stated project goals? What kind of decisions can the project consider after research data is available? What are the reliability and validity coefficients and how were they arrived?

IV. What can I do to help others coordinate?

The Imperial County Coordinated Planning Project has observed that agency managers from one agency are much more cooperative, if they are assisting cooperative strategies in another agency. At times it has appeared that commitment to cooperative planning is more intense, if such efforts are not focused on individuals. How can a project focus on ideas and practices rather than personalities and agencies? How can changes be integrated in an agency without evaluation of the agency occurring from outside? If an agency is open to suggestions for modification from the outside, how will order be maintained from within? How will cooperative goals and objectives be maintained? Who will evaluate agency staff working on cooperative goals? What obstacles must be negotiated to change agency rules, practices and expenditures of personnel time?

V. But how can I cooperate with others when I do not have the personnel, money or time?

One assertion of cooperative planning is that it will require fewer resources, avoid duplication and maximize available resources. Most coordinated planning and service delivery projects in the past have concluded that cooperative projects take more resources not less. There has also been speculation that rural projects are more likely to be successful than are projects attempted in urban communities. Data from 70 coordination projects nationwide in 1975 did not support this hypothesis. Projects in urban and medium size cities seem to move beyond planning

to implementation, more often than did rural projects.

The Imperial County Coordinated Planning Project has found that obtaining additional resources to implement strategies is difficult. A more accurate point would be how can personnel be maintained in each agency after cutbacks? Since the project began, the Employment Development Department has cut 70% of its staff, the CETA Prime Sponsor has cut 50% of its staff, the Department of Rehabilitation has cut one third of its staff, the local community college has been asked to make up a \$350,000 deficit by the end of the 1981 fiscal year.

From where will funds to cooperate come to finance additional costs of the project? How will agencies finance the time for agency personnel to participate in the project? What programs and services will be shared by other agencies via in-kind contributions. Which of these will be integrated? Which will be linked by a Memorandum of Understanding? How will personnel already overworked and committed by virtue of recent cutbacks find the time to participate in cooperative programs?

Summary

The cooperative planning efforts at the local level in one rural agricultural community of California were designed to link and integrate employment and training programs. This project has found that the proper perspective to coordinated planning is as important as the actual plan. A democratic data-based decision making strategy was employed to encourage group participation and interagency goals.

The five major cooperative planning indicators are as follows:

- 1) How can you put it all together to please me now?
- 2) Why should you listen to them?
- 3) Don't we need more information before we can plan?
- 4) What can I do to help others coordinate?
- 5) But how can I cooperate with others when I do not have the personnel time or money?

Resources

American Institute for Research (AIR), May 1980, Edited Volume of Materials On Cooperative Planning and Interagency Coordination of Services

AIR, February 1980, Annotated Bibliography Concerning Coordinated Planning, Service Integration, and Interagency Cooperation for Career Development

Van Ausdley, Steven, Comprehensive Institutional Planning in Two-Year Colleges: Volume I - An Overview and Conceptual Framework, Volume II - A Planning Process and Case Study, National Center for Research in Vocational Education, Ohio State University, 1960, Keany Road, Columbus, Ohio 43210